Intercultural Communication: Four Important Issues to Keep in Mind (907 words)

The workforce has become more and more diverse: different ages, values, ethnicities, and cultures. There are four important issues to keep in mind: Individualism versus Collectivism, Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Task versus Socially-oriented. Keeping these different perspectives in mind can make intercultural communication an asset rather than a liability.

Individualism versus Collectivism: Some cultures value the individual, whereas others value the group. This is referred to as individualism or collectivism.   If you grew up in the United States, you are likely a member of an individualistic culture. People that are from individualistic cultures tend to view their primary responsibility as being to themselves. They probably gain most of their identity and self-esteem from their own accomplishments and their attitude is characterized by self-reliance and competition. They are probably relatively tolerant of conflicts, using a direct, solution-oriented approach. This orientation is likely to produce and reward stars. So, are you looking out for number one? Are you self-reliant, have high self-esteem, and love to be recognized for your individual effort and success?

People that listen without challenge may be members of collectivistic cultures. They tend to be more attentive to, and concerned with, the opinions of significant others. They tend to be less direct in conflict situations and often place greater emphasis on harmony. They feel loyalties and obligations to groups of which they are members: the family, the community, the organization, and their work teams.

Here are my suggestions when it comes to the issue of individualism and collectivism. Members of an individualistic culture need to manage their desires to dominate group discussions and to "win" in problem-solving situations. Members of a collectivistic culture need to consider speaking up and speaking out, even disagreeing, when it is in the best interests of the group.

Power Distance: Power distance refers to the degree to which members are willing to accept a difference in power and status between members of a group. People from low power distance cultures believe in the principle of equality. They are less likely to feel that groups need a leader, or that people who occupy that role automatically deserve unquestioning obedience. They also expect leaders to be more considerate of their interests and needs, whether it is you, or the administration, or the company.

People from high-power distance cultures tend to willingly subordinate themselves to a leader; especially one whose title comes from socially accepted sources such as age, experience, training, or status. So, given your age, experience, and training, you are granted a certain degree of status from them. It feels good to be granted some status. It feels good to feel valued.

There is a difference across cultures when it comes to power distance and status. It is amazing, in the United States, if you really wanted to (with a few phone calls to your

congressional representative), you could probably talk to the president of this country. That is remarkable.

Uncertainty Avoidance: People approach change and risk differently. This element of intercultural communication is referred to as uncertainty avoidance. Some cultures accept and even welcome risk, uncertainty, and change; others are uncomfortable with these unavoidable trends. If you are from a culture that has a high tolerance for uncertainty, you may be more willing to take risks and more accepting of change. You also may be more willing to break the rules for pragmatic reasons. Inally, you would probably accept conflict as natural.

If you are from a culture that has a low tolerance for uncertainty, you may favor stability. You would probably tend to avoid surprises and be uncomfortable with ambiguous tasks and reluctant to take risks. Also, you are probably more loyal to employers and accept seniority as the basis for leadership. Finally, you might view conflict as undesirable.

So, keep this in mind, you may have a tolerance for uncertainty, however, others may not. It may be because of a cultural perspective. Some cultures welcome change and others may try to avoid it. Some cultures welcome risk and others favor stability. The key is to keep the conversation going by encouraging and welcoming the value of both perspectives.

Task-oriented versus Socially-oriented: Some cultures' focus is more task-oriented and some cultures' focus is more socially-oriented. One focuses heavily on getting the job done, one is more likely to be concerned about the feelings of members and their smooth functioning as a team. If you come from a task-oriented culture, you will focus on making the team more competent through training and the use of up-to-date methods. You will be highly concerned about meeting deadlines, with individual success, with advancing to more responsible jobs, and receiving better training.

If you come from a socially-oriented culture, you will likely focus more on different concerns: cooperative problem solving, a friendly atmosphere, and good physical working conditions. Members may still be interested in solving the problem at hand, but they are reluctant to do so if the personal costs to members, in stress and hard feelings, may be high.

You can get things done and get along with others if you are open to both perspectives. We get paid to get things done. We gain enjoyment from our jobs by getting along with others. That old adage about TEAM, Together Everyone Achieves More, just may be true.

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